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ABSTRACT

Career counseling in secondary schools is important for all students, but it is especially critical for students with learning disabilities. This digest describes how making developmental career counseling a focus in secondary schools contributes to the success of youth with learning disabilities in post-school employment. These students show patterns of thinking and behavior that are alterable through cognitive intervention. In cognitive instruction, counselors and teachers provide clear explanations and models of behaviors and thinking that students may not be able to develop spontaneously, with problem-solving and other complex thinking skills having a central place. Although the development of career counseling programs can be carried out by local school jurisdictions, successful programs backed by research, such as "Pathways" (Hutchinson and Freeman, 1994), are recommended for helping teachers and counselors enhance the career readiness of youths with learning disabilities. Cognitive interventions that are effective with adolescents with learning disabilities are listed, followed by specific examples of activities from the "Pathways" program. (RB)

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Career Counseling of Youth with Learning Disabilities: ERIC Digest

by Nancy Hutchinson

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Career Counseling of Youth with Learning Disabilities

Nancy L. Hutchinson

Overview

Career counseling in secondary schools is important for all students; but it is especially critical for students with learning disabilities. This group comprises about half of identified exceptional students. Although they have normal intelligence, their learning problems "in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities" (Torgeson, 1991, p.21) can prevent them from acquiring knowledge when they are taught in large groups or counseled with unstructured approaches.

Youth with learning disabilities have a higher drop-out rate than their non-handicapped peers. These youth report a greater need for transition services that focus on career counseling and require help in obtaining and maintaining employment. Instructional career counseling using cognitive approaches has been recommended for youth with learning disabilities while theae students are still enrolled in secondary school (Biller, 1987). Cognitive approaches have been used to enhance learning in a number of curriculum areas,to increase self-control in students with learning disabilities (Englert, Tarrant, & Mariage, 1992).

Discussion

Characteristics of youth with learning disabilities, which may contribute to their difficulties in career development, include the following:

- Lack of career maturity and awareness of own abilities (Biller & Horn, 1991).
- Poorly developed planning and monitoring skills (Biller & Horn, 1991).
- Lack of problem solving skill (Hoffman et al., 1987).
- Immature social skills and social awareness (Biller, 1987).
- Low academic achievement, particularly in literacy (Hoffman et al., 1987).

Secondary schools have emphasized academic remediation for these students, particularly in literacy. However, educational interventions are shifting to a more preventive approach by focusing more on the demands of post-school environments.

Employability Factors

In recent research on adults with learning disabilities who were not successfully employed, lack of self-understanding was cited as a pervasive characteristic (e.g., Hoffman et al., 1987). Although they knew they were having problems, these adults did not understand how their specific deficits contributed to their difficulties. Consequently, they did not apply for jobs that capitalized on their strengths, and did not anticipate problems or develop compensatory strategies when they were having trouble meeting the demands at work. Adults with learning disabilities described themselves as experiencing difficulty attaining employment--particularly in completing application forms and in creating a positive impression in interviews. In reports to Hoffman et al.(1987) adults attributed their difficulties in keeping a job to a lack of social acceptance and a loss of temper. Employers have stated that persons with learning disabilities possess poor attitude, are unreliabile, and they lack interpersonal skills.

On the other hand, successful employment of adults with learning disabilities has been attributed to their choosing careers in their areas of strength and is due to a quest for control of their lives. This quest for control included such factors as goal-setting, persistence, and adaptability (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992). Adults with learning disabilities who are successful in employment report either receiving or seeking special services to overcome their limitations (Gerber et al., 1992).

It is particularly important for individuals with learning disabilities to receive career counseling and to participate in career-development programs during secondary school. These programs can help them select careers that will utilize strengths and de-emphasize weaknesses and help them to attain employment by teaching them skills in employment writing and interviewing.

They may also handle problems that arise on the job, including problems with interpersonal skills and anger control.

Interventions

Career counseling group interventions using cognitive instruction, have been recommended for youth. Such group interventions are especially recommended for youth with learning disabilities (e.g.,Biller, 1987). In cognitive instruction, counselors and teachers provide clear explanations and models of behaviors and thinking that students may not be able to develop spontaneously. Students practice with peers in pairs and small groups, adapting the problem-solving approaches and explanations of the teacher to develop their own understanding (Englert et al., 1992).

In cognitively-based instruction, problem solving and other complex thinking skills have a central place. Rather than absorbing facts, students make sense of what they are taught and construct their own knowledge (Hutchinson & Freeman 1994). Students learn when they are cognitively engaged as they work with ideas and actively use information as it is acquired. In the classroom, cognitive approaches involve students interacting with each other. Thinking about their answers and giving explanations for their thinking helps students realize there are a number of ways of arriving at understanding. Moreover, negotiating meaning, listening to colleagues, and arriving at consensus are skills required in the modern workplace.

A four-year research program investigated whether, by using structured cognitive instruction as described above, teachers and counselors could enhance the career readiness of youth with learning disabilities. The program used was *Pathways* (Hutchinson & Freeman, 1994), a cognitive instructional program designed to address five career-related areas: awareness of self and careers, employment writing, interview skills, problem solving on the job, and anger management. Studies of this program demonstrated significant increases in self-awareness and career awareness, improved skills in employment writing and interviewing, and advanced strategies in problem solving and anger management (e.g., Hutchinson, Freeman, & Fisher, 1993).

Cognitive interventions that are effective with adolescents with learning disabilities usually include student involvement in setting goals; clear demonstrations of task-specific strategies and self-talk that will help students; clear explanations of ways in which the strategy is relevant; opportunities for students to practice both behaviors and thinking skills in authentic situations; opportunities for student interaction, especially giving and listening to explanations; feedback, using prompting or modeling following errors rather than telling the answer; use of student performance to change instruction in a timely way; and teaching students to generalize and apply knowledge across settings, and conditions. (Based on Englert et al., 1992).

Pathways includes many activities in which students take on unfamiliar roles to enhance their understanding and motivation. For example, in one activity students assume the roles of employers and examine completed application forms to decide which applicants will receive interviews. Based on this experience, they develop guidelines for themselves for completing applications. They then approach the task with increased awareness of the need for tidy, complete, and informative responses if they want employers to select them for interviews based on their applications. In *Pathways*, activities frequently have three phases. First, the teacher models a strategy by thinking out loud; this means teachers must be willing to make their thinking and problem solving visible to students while modeling with a sample problem or task. Second, the students engage in guided practice or undertake an authentic task with a partner or in a small group while receiving feedback. This works well when students alternate roles, taking turns thinking aloud and responding to a peer thinking aloud. Last, the students practice or carry out the activity independently until they are competent and confident using the strategy.

Summary and Conclusions

Making developmental career counseling a focus in secondary schools contributes to the success of youth with learning disabilities in post-school employment. These students show patterns of thinking and behavior that are alterable through cognitive intervention. Although the development of career counseling programs can be carried out by local school jurisdictions,a program such as *Pathways*, provides a successful model that is based on four years of development and evaluation research. Career counselors, classroom teachers, and special educators can work together to tailor a program to meet the needs of youth with learning disabilities in their community.

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